JOHN JACOB ASTOR
The First
by Elbert Hubbard

HE WAS ALWAYS SITTING ON THE DOOR-STEP BEFORE THE OWNER

JOHN JACOB ASTOR was born of a Dutch family that had migrated down to Heidelberg from Antwerp. Through some strange freak of atavism the father of the boy bred back and was more or less of a stone age cave dweller. He was a butcher by trade, in the little town of Waldorf, a few miles from Heidelberg. A butcher's business then was to travel around and kill the pet pig or sheep or cow that the tender-hearted owners dare not harm. The butcher was a pariah, a sort of unofficial industrial hangman.

John Jacob Astor was the youngest of four sons and as many daughters. The brothers ran away early in life and went to sea or joined the army. One of these boys came to America and followed his father's trade of butcher.

Jacob Astor, the happy father of John Jacob, used to take the boy with him on his pig killing expeditions. This for two reasons—one, so the lad would learn a trade, and the other to make sure that the boy did not run away.

The pastor of the local Lutheran church took pity on this boy, who had such disgust for his father's trade, and hired him to work in his garden and run errands.

Under the kindly care of the village parson John Jacob grew in mind and body—his estate was to come later. When he was 17 his father came to the parsonage and made a formal demand for his services. The young man must take up his father's work of butchering.

That night John Jacob walked out of Waldorf by the wan light of the moon, headed for Antwerp. He carried a big red handkerchief, in which his worldly goods were knotted.

He reached Antwerp in a week. There he got a job on the docks as a laborer. The next day he was promoted to checker-off. The captain of a ship asked him to go to London and figure up the manifests on the way. He went.

The captain of the ship recommended him to the company in London and the boy was piling up wealth at the rate of a guinea a month.

In September, 1783, came the news to London that George Washington had surrendered. In any event peace had been declared—Cornwallis had forced the issue, so the Americans had stopped fighting.

A little later it was given out that England had given up her American colonies and they were free.

Intuitively John Jacob Astor felt that the "new world" was the place for him. He bought passage by a sailing ship bound for Baltimore, at a cost of five pounds. He then fastened five pounds in a belt around his waist and with the rest of his money—after sending two pounds home to his father, with a letter of love—bought a dozen German flutes.

He had learned to play on this instrument with proficiency and in America he thought there would be an opening for musicians and musical instruments.

John Jacob was then nearly 20 years of age.

On board ship he met a German, 20 years older than himself, who was a fur trader and had been home on a visit. John Jacob played the flute and the German friend told stories of fur trading among the Indians.

Young Astor's curiosity was excited. The Waldorf-Astoria plan of flute playing was forgotten. He fed on fur trading.

Arriving in Baltimore, he was disappointed to learn that there were no fur traders there. He started for New York.

There he found work with a certain Robert Bowne, a Quaker, who bought and sold furs.

Young Astor set himself to learn the business—every part of it. He was always sitting on the doorstep before the owner, carrying a big key to open the warehouse, got around in the morning. He was the last to leave at night.

The qualities that make a youth a good servant are the basic ones for mastership. Astor's alertness, willingness, loyalty and ability to obey delivered his employer over into his hands.

Robert Bowne, the good old Quaker, insisted that Jacob should call him Robert, and from boarding the young man with a nearby war widow who took cheap boarders, Bowne took young Astor to his own house and raised his pay from $2 a week to $6.

Bowne had made an annual trip to Montreal for many years. Montreal was the metropolis for furs. Bowne went to Montreal himself because he did not know of anyone he could trust to carry the message to Garcia.

Young Astor had been with Bowne only a year. He spoke imperfect English, but he did not drink or gamble and he knew furs and was honest.

Bowne started him off for Canada with a belt full of gold; his only weapon was a German flute that he carried in his hand.

John Jacob Astor ascended the Hudson river to Albany and then with pack on his back struck north, alone, through the forest for Lake Champlain. As he approached an Indian settlement he played his flute. The aborigines showed no disposition to give him the hook. He hired Indians to paddle him up to the Canadian border. He reached Montreal.

The fur traders there knew Bowne as a very sharp buyer and so had their quills out on his approach. But young Astor was seemingly indifferent. His manner was courteous and easy. He got close to his man and took his pick of the pelts at fair prices. He expended all of his money and even bought on credit, for there are men who always have credit.

Young Astor found Indian nature to be simply human nature. The savage was a man and courtesy, gentleness and fairly good flute playing soothed his savage breast. Astor had beads and blankets, a flute and a smile. The Indians carried his goods by relays and then passed him on with guttural certificates as to character to other red men and at last he reached New York without the loss of a pelt or the dampening of his ardor.

Bowne was delighted. To young Astor it was nothing. He had in his blood the success corpuscle.

He might have remained with Bowne and become a partner in the business, but Bowne had business limitations and Astor hadn't.

Hence, after a three years' apprenticeship, Astor knew all that Bowne did and all he himself could imagine besides. So he resigned.

In 1786 John Jacob Astor began business on his own account on Water street, New York.

Astor had made friends with the Indians up the Hudson clear to Albany and they were acting as recruiting agents for him.

Having collected several thousand dollars' worth of furs, he shipped them to London and embarked as a passenger in the steerage.

In London furs were becoming a fad. Astor sorted and sifted his buyers, as he had his skins. He himself dressed in a suit of fur and thus proved his ability as an advertiser. He picked his men and charged all the traffic would bear. All of the money he received for his skins he invested in "India" goods"—colored cloth, beads, blankets, knives, axes and musical instruments.

His was the first store in New York that carried a stock of musical instruments. These he sold to savages and also he supplied the stolid Dutch the best of everything in this particular line, from a bazoo to a Stradivarius.

When he got back to New York he at once struck out through the wilderness to buy furs of the Indians, or, better still, to interest them in bringing furs to him.

He knew the value of friendship in trade as no man of the time did.

In 1790 John Jacob Astor married Sarah Todd. Her mother was a Brevoort and it was brought about by her coming to Astor to buy furs with which to make herself a coat. Her ability to judge furs and make them up brought young Astor into "the best Dutch New York society," a combination that was quite as exclusive then as now.

This marriage was a business partnership as well as marital, and proved a success in every way. Sarah was a worker, with all the good old Dutch qualities of patience, persistence, industry and economy. When her husband went on trips she kept store.

Capt. Cook had skirted the Pacific coast from Cape Horn to Alaska and had brought to the attention of the fur dealing and fur wearing world the sea otter of the northern Pacific. He also gave a psychological prophetic glimpse of the insidious sealskin sack.

In 1790 a ship from the Pacific brought a hundred otter skins to New York. The skins were quickly sold to London buyers at exorbitant prices.

The nobility wanted sea otter, or "royal American ermine," as they called it. The scarcity boomed the price. Ships were quickly fitted out and dispatched.

Astor encouraged these expeditions, but at first invested no money in them, as he considered them "extra hazardous." He was not a speculator.

Until the year 1800 Astor lived over his store in Water street, but he then moved to the plain and modest house at 223 Broadway, on the site of the old Astor house. Here he lived for 25 years.

The fur business was simple and very profitable.

In 1800 Astor owned three ships, which he had bought so as absolutely to control his trade. Ascertaining that London dealers were reshipping furs to China, early in the century he dispatched one of his ships loaded with furs directly to the orient, with explicit written instructions to the captain as to what the cargo should be sold for. The money was to be invested in teas and silks.

The ship sailed away and had been gone a year.

No tidings had come from her.

Suddenly a messenger came with the news that the ship was in the bay. We can imagine the interest of Mr. and Mrs. Astor as they locked their store and ran to the Battery. Sure enough, it was their ship.

The profit on this voyage was $70,000.

By 1810 John Jacob Astor was worth $2,000,000. He began to invest all his surplus money in New York real estate. He bought acreage property in the vicinity of Canal street. Next he bought Richmond Hill, the estate of Aaron Burr. It consisted of 160 acres just about Twenty-third street. He paid for the land a thousand dollars an acre. People said Astor was crazy.

In ten years he began to sell lots from the Richmond Hill property at the rate of $5,000 an acre. Fortunately for his estate, he did not sell much of the land at this price, for it is this particular dirt that makes up that vast property known as "the Astor estate."

During the revolutionary war Roger Morris of Putnam county, N. Y., made the mistake of siding with the Tories and expressing himself too freely. A mob collected and Morris and his family escaped, taking ship to England.

HEADED FOR ANTWERP

Roger Morris is known in history as the man who married Mary Philipse. And this lady lives in history because she had the felicity of having been proposed to by George Washington. The lady pleaded for time, which the father of his country declined to give. A small quarrel followed and George saddled his horse and rode on his way to fame and fortune.

Just 22 years after this bout with Cupid Gen. George Washington, commander-in-chief of the continental army, occupied the Roger Morris mansion as headquarters, the occupants having fled. It was Washington who formally confiscated the property and turned it over to the state of New York as contraband of war.

The Morris estate of about 50,000 acres was parceled out and sold by the state of New York to settlers.

It seems, however, that Roger Morris had only a life interest in the estate and this was a legal point so fine that it was entirely overlooked in the joy of confiscation.

John Jacob Astor accidentally ascertained the facts. He was convinced that the heirs could not be robbed of their rights through the acts of a leaseholder, which, legally, was the status of Roger Morris. Astor was a good real estate lawyer himself, but he referred the point to the best counsel he could find. They agreed with him. He next hunted up the heirs and bought their quit-claims for $100,000.

He then notified the parties who had purchased the land and they in turn made claim upon the state for protection.

After much legal parleying the case was tried according to stipulation, with the state of New York directly as defendant and Astor and the occupants as plaintiffs. Daniel Webster and Martin Van Buren appeared for the state and an array of lesser legal lights for Astor. The case was narrowed down to the plain and simple point that Roger Morris was not the legal owner of the estate and that the rightful heirs could not be made to suffer for the "treason, contumacy and contravention" of another. Astor won and as a compromise the state issued him 20-year bonds bearing six per cent interest for the neat sum of $500,000.

Astor took a deep interest in the Lewis and Clark expedition. He went to Washington to see Lewis and questioned him at great length about the northwest.

Washington Irving has told the story of Astoria at length. It was the one financial plunge taken by John Jacob Astor.

And in spite of the fact that it failed the whole affair does credit to the prophetic brain of Astor.

"This country will see a chain of growing and prosperous cities straight from New York to Astoria, Oregon," said this man in reply to a doubting questioner.

He laid his plans before congress, urging a line of army posts, 40 miles apart, from the western extremity of Lake Superior to the Pacific. "These forts or army posts will evolve into cities," said Astor, when he called on Thomas Jefferson, who was then president of the United States. Jefferson was interested, but non-committal. Astor exhibited maps of the great lakes and the country beyond. He urged with a prescience then not possessed by any living man that at the western extremity of Lake Superior would grow up a great city. Yet in 1876 Duluth was ridiculed by the caustic tongue of Proctor Knott, who asked, "What will become of Duluth when the lumber crop is cut?"

Then Astor proceeded to say that another great city would grow up at the southern extremity of Lake Michigan. Gen. Dearborn, secretary of war under Jefferson, had just established Fort Dearborn on the present site of Chicago. Astor commended this and said, "From a fort you get a trading post and from a trading post you will get a city."

He pointed out to Jefferson on his map of the site the Falls of St. Anthony. "There you will have a fort some day, for, wherever there is water power there will grow up mills for grinding grain and sawmills as well. This place of power will have to be protected and so you will have there a post, which will eventually be replaced by a city." Yet Fort Snelling was nearly 50 years in the future and St. Paul and Minneapolis were dreams undreamed.

Jefferson took time to think about it and then wrote Astor: "Your beginning of a city on the western coast is a great acquisition and I look forward to a time when our population will spread itself up and down along the whole Pacific frontage, unconnected with us excepting by ties of blood and common interest—and enjoying, like us, the rights of self-goverment."

COURTESY AND FAIRLY GOOD FLUTE PLAYING SOOTHED THE SAVAGE BREAST

A company was formed and two expeditions set out for the mouth of the Columbia river, one by land and the other by sea.

The land expedition barely got through alive—it was a perilous undertaking, with accidents by flood and field.

But the route by the water was feasible.

The town was founded and soon became a center of commercial activity. Had Astor been on the ground to take personal charge a city like Seattle would have bloomed and blossomed on the Pacific 50 years ago.

There came a grand grab at Astoria and it was each for himself and the devil take the hindermost; it was a stampede. System and order went by the board. The strongest stole the most, as usual, but all got a little. And England's gain in citizens was our loss.

Astor lost a million dollars by the venture. He smiled calmly and said, "The plan was right, but my men were weak; that is all. The gateway to China will be from the northwest. My plans were right. Time will vindicate my reasoning."

When the block on Broadway bounded by Vesey and Barclay streets was cleared of its plain two-story houses, preparatory to building the Astor house, wise men shook their heads and said, "It's too far up town."

But the free bus that met all boats solved the difficulty and gave the cue to hotel men all over the world. Astor was worth ten million, but he took a personal delight in sitting in the lobby of the Astor house and watching the dollars roll into this palace that his brain had planned.

Astor was tall, thin and commanding in appearance. He had only one hallucination and that was that he spoke the Eglish language. The accent he possessed at 30 was with him in all its pristine effulgence at 85. "Nopody vould know I vas a Cherman—aind't it?" he used to say. Yet where John Jacob wrote it was English without a flaw.

In all of his dealings he was uniquely honorable and upright. He paid and he made others pay. His word was his bond. He was not charitable in the sense of indiscriminate giving. "To give something for nothing is to weaken the giver," was one of his favorite sayings. That this attitude protected a miserly spirit it is easy to say, but it is not wholly true. In his later years he carried with him a book containing a record of his possessions. He would visit a certain piece of property and then turn to his book and see what it had cost him ten or twenty years before. To realize that his prophetic vision had been correct was to him a great source of satisfaction.

His habits were of the best. He went to bed at nine o'clock and was up before six. At seven he was at his office. He knew enough to eat sparingly and to walk, so he was never sick. Millionaires, as a rule, are woefully ignorant. Up to a certain sum, they grow with their acquisitions. Then they begin to wither at the heart. The care of a fortune is a penalty. I advise the gentle reader to think twice before accumulating ten millions.

John Jacob Astor was exceptional in his combined love of money and love of books. Fitz-Green Halleck was his private secretary, hired on a basis of literary friendship. Washington Irving was a close friend, too.

Astor died, aged 86. It was a natural death—a thing that very seldom occurs. The machinery all ran down at once.

William B. Astor, the son of John Jacob, was brought up in the financial way he should go. He was studious, methodical, conservative, and had the good sense to carry out the wishes of his father. His son, John Jacob Astor, was very much like him, only of more neutral tint. The time is now ripe for another genius in the Astor family. If William B. Astor lacked the courage and initiative of his parent, he had more culture and spoke English without an accent. The son of John Jacob Astor, second, is William Waldorf Astor, who speaks English with an English accent, you know.

John Jacob Astor, besides having the first store for the sale of musical instruments in America, organized the first orchestra of over 12 players. He brought over a leader from Germaany and did much to foster the love of music in the New World.

Every worthy Maecaenas imagines that he is a great painter, writer, sculptor or musician, side tracked by cares thrust upon him by unkind fate. John Jacob Astor once told Washington Irving that it was only business responsibility that prevented his being a novelist; and at other times he declared his intent to take up music as a profession as soon as he had gotten all of his securities properly tied up. And, whether he worked out his dreams or not, there is no doubt but that they added to his peace, happiness and length of days. Happy is the man who escapes the critics by leaving his literary masterpiece in the ink.